

Hurrians

The **Hurrians** (/ˈhʊəriənz/; cuneiform: 𒆸𒆪𒆺𒆫; transliteration: *Hu-ur-ri*; also called Hari, Khurrites, Hourri, Churri, Hurri or Hurriter) were a people of the Bronze Age Near East. They spoke a Hurro-Urartian language called Hurrian and lived in Anatolia, Syria and Northern Mesopotamia. The largest and most influential Hurrian nation was the kingdom of Mitanni, its ruling class perhaps being Indo-Iranian speakers. The population of the Indo-European-speaking Hittite Empire in Anatolia included a large population of Hurrians, and there is significant Hurrian influence in Hittite mythology. By the Early Iron Age, the Hurrians had been assimilated with other peoples. Their remnants were subdued by a related people that formed the state of Urartu. The present-day Armenians are an amalgam of the Indo-European groups with the Hurrians and Uratians.<sup>[1]</sup>

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The approximate area of Hurrian settlement in the Middle Bronze Age is shown in purple

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## Language

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The Hurrian language is closely related to the Uartian language, the language of the ancient kingdom of Urartu. Together they form the Hurro-Urartian language family. The external connections of the Hurro-Urartian languages are disputed. There exist various proposals for a genetic relationship to other language families (e.g. the Northeast Caucasian languages), but none of these are generally accepted.<sup>[2]</sup>

From the 21st century BC to the late 18th century BC, Assyria controlled colonies in Anatolia, and the Hurrians, like the Hattians or Lullubis, adopted the Assyrian Akkadian cuneiform script for their own language about 2000 BC. Texts in the Hurrian language in cuneiform have been found at Hattusa, Ugarit (Ras Shamra), as well as in one of the longest of the Amarna letters, written by King Tushratta of Mitanni to Pharaoh Amenhotep III. It was the only long Hurrian text known until a multi-tablet collection of literature in Hurrian with a Hittite translation was discovered at Hattusa in 1983.

## History

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### Early Bronze Age

#### Urkesh

The Khabur River valley became the heart of the Hurrian lands for a millennium. The first known Hurrian kingdom emerged around the city of Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan) during the third millennium BC. There is evidence that they were initially allied with the east Semitic Akkadian Empire of Mesopotamia, indicating they had a firm hold on the area by the reign of Naram-Sin of Akkad (c. 2254–2218 BC). This region hosted other rich cultures (see Tell Halaf and Tell Brak). The city-state of Urkesh had some powerful neighbors.

### Middle Bronze Age



Incense burner. Hurrian period, 1300-1000 BC. From Tell Basmosian (also Tell Bazmusian), modern-day Lake Dukan, Iraq. Currently displayed in Erbil Civilization Museum

Hurrian names occur sporadically in northwestern Mesopotamia and the area of Kirkuk in modern Iraq by the Middle Bronze Age. Their presence was attested at Nuzi, Urkesh and other sites. They eventually infiltrated and occupied a broad arc of fertile farmland stretching from the Khabur River valley in the west to the foothills of the Zagros Mountains in the east. I. J. Gelb and E. A. Speiser believed East Semitic speaking Assyrians/Subarians had been the linguistic and ethnic substratum of northern Mesopotamia since earliest times, while Hurrians were merely late arrivals.<sup>[4]</sup> However, Subarians are now believed to have been a Hurrian, or at least a Hurro-Urartian, people.<sup>[5]</sup>



The Louvre lion and accompanying stone tablet bearing the earliest known text in Hurrian

## Urkesh

At some point in the early second millennium BC, the Northwest Semitic speaking Amorite kingdom of Mari to the south subdued Urkesh and made it a vassal state. In the continuous power struggles over Mesopotamia, another Amorite dynasty had usurped the throne of the Old Assyrian Empire, which had controlled colonies in Hurrian, Hattian and Hittite regions of eastern Anatolia since the 21st century BC. The Assyrians then made themselves masters over Mari and much of north east Amurru (Syria) in the late 19th and early 18th centuries BC. Shubat-Enlil (modern Tell Leilan), was made the capital of this Old Assyrian empire by Shamshi Adad I at the expense of the earlier capital of Assur.

## Yamhad

The Hurrians also migrated further west in this period. By 1725 BC they are found also in parts of northern Syria, such as Alalakh. The mixed Amorite-Hurrian kingdom of Yamhad is recorded as struggling for this area with the early Hittite king Hattusilis I around 1600 BC. Hurrians also settled in the coastal region of Adaniya in the country of Kizzuwatna, southern Anatolia. Yamhad eventually weakened vis-a-vis the powerful Hittites, but this also opened Anatolia for Hurrian cultural influences. The Hittites were influenced by both the Hurrian and Hattian cultures over the course of several centuries.



Foundation tablet. Dedication to God Nergal by Hurrian king Atalshen, king of Urkish and Nawar, Habur Bassin, circa 2000 BC. Louvre Museum AO 5678.

*"Of Nergal the lord of Hawalum, Atal-shen, the caring shepherd, the king of Urkesh and Nawar, the son of Sadar-mat the king, is the builder of the temple of Nergal, the one who overcomes opposition. Let Shamash and Ishtar destroy the seeds of whoever removes this tablet. Shaum-shen is the craftsman."*<sup>[3]</sup>

## Late Bronze Age

### Mitanni

The Indo-European Hittites continued expanding south after the defeat of Yamhad. The army of the Hittite king Mursili I made its way to Babylon (by then a weak and minor state) and sacked the city. The destruction of the Babylonian kingdom, the presence of unambitious or isolationist kings in Assyria, as well as the destruction of the kingdom of Yamhad, helped the rise of another Hurrian dynasty. The first ruler was a legendary king called Kirta who founded the kingdom of Mitanni (known also as *Hanigalbat*/Hanigalbat by the Assyrians, and to the Egyptians as *nhrn*) around 1500 BC. Mitanni gradually grew from the region around the Khabur valley and was perhaps the most powerful kingdom of the Near East in c. 1475–1365 BC, after which it was eclipsed and eventually destroyed by the Middle Assyrian Empire.

Some theonyms, proper names and other terminology of the Mitanni exhibit an Indo-Aryan superstrate, suggesting that an Indo-Aryan elite imposed itself over the Hurrian population in the course of the Indo-Aryan expansion.<sup>[6][7]</sup> (See Mitanni-Aryan.)

## Arrapha

Another Hurrian kingdom also benefited from the demise of Babylonian power in the sixteenth century BC. Hurrians had inhabited the region northeast of the river Tigris, around the modern Kirkuk. This was the kingdom of Arrapha. Excavations at Yorgan Tepe, ancient Nuzi, proved this to be one of the most important sites for our knowledge about the Hurrians. Hurrian kings such as Ithi-Teshup and Ithiya ruled over Arrapha, yet by the mid-fifteenth century BC they had become vassals of the Great King of Mitanni. The kingdom of Arrapha itself was destroyed by the Assyrians in the mid 14th century BC and thereafter became an Assyrian city.

## Bronze Age collapse

By the 13th century BC all of the Hurrian states had been vanquished by other peoples, with the Mitanni kingdom destroyed by Assyria. The heartlands of the Hurrians, the Khabur river valley and south eastern Anatolia, became provinces of the Middle Assyrian Empire (1366–1020 BC) which came to rule much of the Near East and Asia Minor. It is not clear what happened to these early Hurrian people at the end of the Bronze Age. Some scholars have suggested that Hurrians lived on in the country of Nairi north of Assyria during the early Iron Age, before this too was conquered by Assyria. The Hurrian population of northern Syria in the following centuries seems to have given up their language in favor of the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian, and later, Aramaic.

## Urartu

However, a power vacuum was to allow a new and powerful state whose rulers spoke Urartian, similar to old Hurrian, to arise. The Middle Assyrian Empire, after destroying the Hurro-Mitanni Empire, the Hittite Empire, defeating the Phrygians and Elamites, conquering Babylon, the Arameans of Syria, northern Ancient Iran and Canaan and forcing the Egyptians out of much of the near east, itself went into a century of relative decline from the latter part of the 11th century BC. The Urartians were thus able to impose themselves around Lake Van and Mount Ararat, forming the powerful Kingdom of Urartu. During the 11th and 10th centuries BC, the kingdom eventually encompassed a region stretching from the Caucasus Mountains in the north, to the borders of northern Assyria and northern Ancient Iran in the south, and controlled much of eastern Anatolia.

Assyria began to once more expand from circa. 935 BC, and Urartu and Assyria became fierce rivals. Urartu successfully repelled Assyrian expansionism for a time, however from the 9th to 7th century BC it progressively lost territory to Assyria. It was to survive until the 7th century BC, by which time it was conquered fully into the Neo Assyrian Empire (911–605 BC).

The Assyrian Empire collapsed from 620 to 605 BC, after a series of brutal internal civil wars weakened it to such an extent that a coalition of its former vassals; the Medes, Persians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Scythians and Cimmerians were able to attack and gradually destroy it. Urartu was ravaged by marauding Indo-European speaking Scythian and Cimmerian raiders during this time, with its vassal king (together with the king of neighbouring Lydia) vainly pleading with the beleaguered Assyrian king for help. After the fall of Assyria, Urartu came under the control of the Median Empire and then its successor Persian Empire during the 6th century BC. During the 2nd millennium BC a new wave of Indo-European speakers migrated over the Caucasus into Urartian lands, these being the Armenians. An alternate theory suggests that Armenians were tribes indigenous to the northern shores of Lake Van or Urartu's northern periphery (possibly as the Hayasans, Etuini, and/or Diauehi, all of whom are known only from references left by neighboring peoples such as Hittites, Urartians, and Assyrians).<sup>[8]</sup> This theory is supported by genetic and archaeological evidence, which is suggestive of an Indo-European presence in Armenia and eastern Turkey by the end of the 3rd millennium BC.<sup>[9][10][11][12][13][14][15]</sup>

It is argued that proto-Armenian came into contact with Urartian at an early date (3rd or 2nd millennium BC), before the formation of the Urartian kingdom. While the Urartian language was used by the royal elite, the population they ruled may have been multi-lingual, and some of these peoples would have spoken Armenian.<sup>[16]</sup>

In the 6th century BC the region became part of the Armenian Orontid Dynasty. The Hurro-Urartians seem to have disappeared from history around this time, almost certainly being absorbed into the Indo-European Armenian population.

## Culture and society

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Knowledge of Hurrian culture relies on archaeological excavations at sites such as Nuzi and Alalakh as well as on cuneiform tablets, primarily from Hattusa (Boghazköy), the capital of the Hittites, whose civilization was greatly influenced by the Hurrians. Tablets from Nuzi, Alalakh, and other cities with Hurrian populations (as shown by personal names) reveal Hurrian cultural features even though they were written in Akkadian. Hurrian cylinder seals were carefully carved and often portrayed mythological motifs. They are a key to the understanding of Hurrian culture and history.

## Ceramic ware

The Hurrians were masterful ceramists. Their pottery is commonly found in Mesopotamia and in the lands west of the Euphrates; it was highly valued in distant Egypt, by the time of the New Kingdom. Archaeologists use the terms Khabur ware and Nuzi ware for two types of wheel-made pottery used by the Hurrians. Khabur ware is characterized by reddish painted lines with a geometric triangular pattern and dots, while Nuzi ware has very distinctive forms, and are painted in brown or black.

## Metallurgy

The Hurrians had a reputation in metallurgy. It is proposed that the Sumerian term for "coppersmith" *tabira/tibira* was borrowed from Hurrian, which would imply an early presence of the Hurrians way before their first historical mention in Akkadian sources.<sup>[17][18]</sup> Copper was traded south to Mesopotamia from the highlands of Anatolia. The Khabur Valley had a central position in the metal trade, and copper, silver and even tin were accessible from the Hurrian-dominated countries Kizzuwatna and Ishuwa situated in the Anatolian highland. Gold was in short supply, and the Amarna letters inform us that it was acquired from Egypt. Not many examples of Hurrian metal work have survived, except from the later Urartu. Some small fine bronze lion figurines were discovered at Urkesh.

## Horse culture

The Mitanni were closely associated with horses. The name of the country of Ishuwa, which might have had a substantial Hurrian population, meant "horse-land" (it is also suggested the name may have Anatolian or proto-Armenian roots).<sup>[19]</sup> A text discovered at Hattusa deals with the training of horses. The man who was responsible for the horse-training was a Hurrian called Kikkuli. The terminology used in connection with horses contains many Indo-Aryan loan-words (Mayrhofer, 1974).

## Music

Among the Hurrian texts from Ugarit are the oldest known instances of written music, dating from c. 1400 BC.<sup>[20]</sup> Among these fragments are found the names of four Hurrian composers, Tapšihuni, Puḫiya(na), Urḫiya, and Ammiya.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Religion

The Hurrian culture made a great impact on the religion of the Hittites. From the Hurrian cult centre at Kummanni in Kizzuwatna, Hurrian religion spread to the Hittite people. Syncretism merged the Old Hittite and Hurrian religions. Hurrian religion spread to Syria, where Baal became the counterpart of Teshub. The Hurrian religion, in different forms, influenced the entire ancient Near East, except ancient Egypt and southern Mesopotamia.

While the Hurrian and Urartian languages are related, there is little similarity between corresponding systems of belief.<sup>[22]</sup>

The main gods in the Hurrian pantheon were:

- Teshub, *Teshup*, the mighty weather god.<sup>[23]</sup>
- Hebat, *Hepa*, his wife,<sup>[24]</sup> the mother goddess, later equated with the main sun goddess of the Hittites<sup>[25]</sup>
- Sharruma, or Sarruma, *Šarruma*, their son, a mountain god of Syrian origin.<sup>[26]</sup>
- Kumarbi, grain god,<sup>[27]</sup> the father of Teshub and a "father of gods" similar to Enlil;<sup>[28]</sup> his home as described in mythology is the city of Urkesh.
- Shaushka, or Shawushka, *Šauska*, the Hurrian counterpart of Ishtar, and a goddess of love, war and healing.<sup>[29]</sup>
- Shimegi, *Šimegi*, the sun god.<sup>[30]</sup>
- Kushuh, *Kušuh*, the moon god and a guardian of oaths.<sup>[31]</sup> Symbols of the sun and the crescent moon appear joined together in the Hurrian iconography.
- Nergal, a Sumerian deity of the netherworld, who had a prominent temple in Urkesh in the earliest period of recorded Hurrian history.<sup>[32]</sup> Possibly a stand-in for a god whose Hurrian name is presently unknown.<sup>[33]</sup>
- Ea, Hayya, the god of wisdom, who was also Mesopotamian in origin.<sup>[34]</sup>
- Allani, goddess of the netherworld.<sup>[35]</sup>



Hurrian incense container



- Ishara, a goddess of Syrian origin.<sup>[36]</sup>
- Aštabi, a war god.<sup>[37]</sup>
- Nupatik, a prominent god of uncertain function.<sup>[38]</sup>
- Hutena and Hutellura, fate and birth goddesses.<sup>[39]</sup>

Hurrian cylinder seals often depict mythological creatures such as winged humans or animals, dragons and other monsters. The interpretation of these depictions of gods and demons remains uncertain. They may have been both protective and evil spirits. Some are reminiscent of the Assyrian shedū.



The Hittite gods Teshub and Hebat, chamber A, Yazilikaya, Hittite rock sanctuary, Turkey

The Hurrian gods do not appear to have had particular "home temples", like in the Mesopotamian religion or Ancient Egyptian religion. Some important cult centres were Kummanni in Kizzuwatna and Hittite Yazilikaya. Harran was at least later a religious centre for the moon god, and Shauskha had an important temple in Nineve, when the city was under Hurrian rule. A temple of Nergal was built in Urkesh in the late third millennium BC. The town of Kahat was a religious centre in the kingdom of Mitanni.

The Hurrian myth "The Songs of Ullikummi", preserved among the Hittites, is a parallel to Hesiod's Theogony; the castration of Uranus by Cronus may be derived from the castration of Anu by Kumarbi, while Zeus's overthrow of Cronus and Cronus's regurgitation of the swallowed gods is like the Hurrian myth of Teshub and Kumarbi.<sup>[40]</sup> It has been argued that the worship of Attis drew on Hurrian myth.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Urbanism

The Hurrian urban culture was not represented by a large number of cities. Urkesh was the only Hurrian city in the third millennium BC. In the second millennium BC we know a number of Hurrian cities, such as Arrapha, Harran, Kahat, Nuzi, Taidu and Washukanni – the capital of Mitanni. Although the site of Washukanni, alleged to be at Tell Fakhariya, is not known for certain, no tell (city mound) in the Khabur Valley much exceeds the size of 1 square kilometer (250 acres), and the majority of sites are much smaller. The Hurrian urban culture appears to have been quite different from the centralized state administrations of Assyria and ancient Egypt. An explanation could be that the feudal organization of the Hurrian kingdoms did not allow large palace or temple estates to develop.

## Archaeology

Hurrian settlements are distributed over three modern countries, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The heart of the Hurrian world is bisected by the modern border between Syria and Turkey. Several sites are situated within the border zone, making access for excavations problematic. A threat to the ancient sites are the many dam projects in the Euphrates, Tigris and Khabur valleys. Several rescue operations have already been undertaken when the construction of dams put entire river valleys under water.

The first major excavations of Hurrian sites in Iraq and Syria began in the 1920s and 1930s. They were led by the American archaeologist Edward Chiera at Yorghana Tepe (Nuzi), and the British archaeologist Max Mallowan at Chagar Bazar and Tell Brak. Recent excavations and surveys in progress are conducted by American, Belgian, Danish, Dutch, French, German and Italian teams of archaeologists, with international participants, in cooperation with the Syrian Department of Antiquities. The tells, or city mounds, often reveal a long occupation beginning in the Neolithic and ending in the Roman period or later. The

characteristic Hurrian pottery, the Khabur ware, is helpful in determining the different strata of occupation within the mounds. The Hurrian settlements are usually identified from the Middle Bronze Age to the end of the Late Bronze Age, with Tell Mozan (Urkesh) being the main exception.

## Important sites

The list includes some important ancient sites from the area dominated by the Hurrians. Excavation reports and images are found at the websites linked. As noted above, important discoveries of Hurrian culture and history were also made at Alalakh, Amarna, Hattusa and Ugarit.

- [Tell Mozan \(ancient Urkesh\)](#)<sup>[42]</sup>
- [Yorghnan Tepe \(ancient Nuzi\)](#)<sup>[43]</sup>
- [Tell Brak \(ancient Nagar\)](#)<sup>[44]</sup>
- [Tell Leilan \(ancient Shehna and Shubat-Enlil\)](#)<sup>[45]</sup>
- [Tell Barri \(ancient Kahat\)](#)<sup>[46]</sup>
- [Tell Beydar \(ancient Nabada\)](#)<sup>[47]</sup>
- [Kenan Tepe](#)<sup>[48]</sup>
- [Tell Tuneinir](#)<sup>[49]</sup>
- [Umm el-Marra \(ancient Tuba?\)](#)<sup>[50]</sup>
- [Tell Chuera](#)<sup>[51]</sup>
- [Hammam al Turkman \(ancient Zalpa?\)](#)<sup>[52]</sup>
- [Tell Sabi Abyad](#)<sup>[53]</sup>
- [Hamoukar](#)<sup>[54]</sup>
- [Chagar Bazar](#)
- [Tell el Fakhariya / Ras el Ayn \(ancient Washukanni?\)](#)
- [Tell Hamidiya \(ancient Taidu?\)](#)<sup>[55]</sup>

## See also

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- [Horites](#)
- [Urartu](#)
- [Mitanni](#)
- [Nairi](#)
- [Kassites](#)

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